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ABSTRACT

In teaching literature appreciation, study of the academic criticism concerning a literary work may prove neither relevant nor more comprhensive to students. Moreover, attempts to overcome this difficulty by conducting classes in which students discuss the work freely often degenerate into cliche swapping and the cataloguing of superficialities. One solution to these problems is to take advantage of students' immense experience with the popular arts, considering literature as anything with a strong verbal element--including music. Students' internalized knowledge of these arts provides great enjoyment and an understanding of their structures. Thus, effective descriptive criticism in literature study can both proceed on the assumption that all works are contrived from similar conventions and structures, and lead to comprehension, discussion, and appreciation of less familiar areas. (JM)

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The Popular Arts and the Teaching of Literature

Robert B. Myers

My topic, "The Popular Arts and the Teaching of Literature," immediately brings the word relevance to mind, a word which has, for the most part, a bad reputation, even though it can mean almost anything from existential authenticity to getting through a university without disturbing a brain cell. I want to treat relevance [illegible] one of its more respectable perspectives.

One of the most intellectually rigorous critical theorists of the past decade, E. D. Hirsch Jr., has used the notion of relevance in his elaborately complex work on interpretive theory. Interpretation, according to Hirsch, consists of nothing other than getting the author's meaning, a most conservative stance in this day when the multiplication of interpretation is nearly an industry. Hirsch argues the principle brilliantly throughout his work. In his view there is something wrong in saying that the 792 readings of, say, Hamlet are all interpretations because the work has only one meaning and hence only one interpretation. The 791 readings left over establish not the text's meaning, but the text's relevance, its significance. In effect, Hirsch is acknowledging something that is not often acknowledged by academic critics--that criticism is not objective. It is, instead, concerned with establishing the value of the work, no matter how much objectivity is claimed for the "approach" employed. And unlike interpretation, which is limited by the criterion of the author's probable intention, criticism can go on forever because the work's significance can be assessed from many points of view. Put another way, criticism establishes a link between the work and a particular audience. Because the audience is always changing, criticism will never run out of opportunities to engage in doing criticism. But once the connection between critic and audience is noted, questions can arise concerning the efficacy of the connection.

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Without exaggerating too much, one might claim that most academic readings of works try to establish the relevance of works in highly intellectualistic terms. Thus, there are critical approaches which connect the work to Freudianism, Marxism, the history of ideas, the history of literature, archetypal thinking, or whatever. Most frequently, an academic piece is a complex combination of several different approaches. Such handling is, of course, quite effective, provided that the audience to which the criticism is directed happens to think in such terms easily and can value existence in terms of the categories erected by such intellectual constructs. To persons who do not think in terms of such consciously contrived structures, such appeals to relevance may have little or no impact. For good or for ill, much of the world fails to construe what is valuable and what is worthless in terms of the intellectual systems fabricated by the Great thinkers of Western Thought, much less those invented by the multitudinous academicians of America's Higher Education Industry.

The foregoing observations raise questions about the relevance of critical approaches themselves, not about the literature which the critical approaches try to clarify. Although academic criticism usually focuses on the work itself in an attmept to put it in the best possible light, this always amounts to making the work relevant to some preferred intellectual construct which had to be absorbed slowly before it became internalized to the point that poems or plays elucidated in its terms could be "comprehended" or made to take on added value. Yet even among the intellectually inclined, there is no one species of relevance-making for all works of literature, in spite of the Humanists desire that the important works of Western literature somehow bear a single complex of values which has a single educational impact on anyone who comes in contact with them. Even the intellectually inclined are fragmented concerning what makes the classics worthwhile and hence have no single way of establishing the value of any one of them. It is certainly not uncommon for an academician to praise one piece of criticism over

another on the grounds that one gets to the essence of the work while the other distorts or belittles it. While such preferences may be construed as grounded in interpretive disputes, such differences are just as readily traceable to differences in evaluative preferences. The one approach makes the work relevant in terms that the academician values, while the other approach makes it relevant in terms which he fails to appreciate.

From the argument that I have outlined so far, I would draw three conclusions:

1. First, making something relevant is not an indecent or intellectually dishonest undertaking. Most literary criticism, whether written or orally presented, consists of demonstrating the work's relevance.

2. Second, the teaching of literature is devoted in great measure to teaching the idea-system or relevance system in terms of which the works will eventuate, hopefully, in appreciative realization. Often the relevance system is no more than implied in the presentation and never really becomes clear to the student. In any case, assimilating such a relevance-system to the point that it becomes the basis of one's literary pleasure probably cannot happen in a short time. Affective appreciation is difficult to achieve by means of hastily-learned intellectual structures.

3. Third, there is no sane reason to assume that the values that make a work relevant to the teacher are the ones that automatically ought to make it valuable to the student. Yet it is not uncommon for students to be penalized for not appreciating particular works in terms of the "proper" relevance systems.

In light of these remarks, the students' complaints that a work is not relevant can be construed as a possible complaint against the critical framework in terms of which it is presented, as saying that the work is not clear to them in terms of value-structures in terms of which they feel. To overcome this difficulty, classes are sometimes conducted in which students simply talk about the work, in the hope

that a pertinent analytical framework will evolve from such free discussion. Sometimes, no doubt, genuine discussion does take place. As often as not, however, the attempts turn into dismal exercises in swapping clichés and catalogues of superficialities. "Discussion" flounders at this level because the students are frequently not adept at articulating their complex experience. Yet while hoping that genuine insights into the relevance of works to the students' value systems will emerge from such activity is often only a fond wish, the assumption that talk about a work ought to preceed in terms of its relevance to the values of the audience doing the talking is the same assumption that motivates the generation of the various intellectualistic "approaches" to literature practiced by academic critics.

It is no secret that students have an almost crushing amount of experience with popular art. Yet this experience is usually not regarded as a resource to be utilized in initiating the students in achieving reaches of literature not familiar to them. If the popular arts are mentioned at all, they are usually mentioned that they may be belittled. I would encourage, to the contrary, that at certain stages, that teachers take advantage of this immense resevoir of the student's experience. By the way, for my purposes, I shall consider as literature anything that has a strong verbal element. Thus, popular music is a strong candidate for the approach I propose. Furthermore, I would point out that most of the popular art with which the students are familiar is performed rather than read. Most of it comes via films or television. Whatever one may think of the quality of the popular arts with which students are familiar, one can hardly avoid agreeing with the following points:

1. The students have an immense acquaintance with a great variety of popular artistic forms.
2. Whatever the quality of the popular arts that they know, they know how to enjoy these arts, not just how to understand them in thin intellectual terms.

3. In fact, their knowledge of the popular arts is more or less internalized, much like their knowledge of language. Even the clumsiest speaker of language has internalized a huge variety of language rules, even though he could not express a grammar rule if his life depended on it.

I would press the comparison of the students' knowledge of art to their knowledge of the language rules necessary to speak the language. In the broadest sense, linguists are structualists who try to examine language in terms of descriptive categories which explain all the phenomena of language and their relationships to each other. In the past fifteen years or so, structualism--the notion that descriptive structures underlie many sorts of behavior--has been gaining hold in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and even literary criticism, though much of the work done there has been somewhat esoteric so far. I would press for a structuralist criticism, a descriptive criticism that makes use of some very old-fashioned assumptions--that works of literature (or any works of art) are made; they are put together, fashioned, shaped, usually to achieve some affective end, which is what Aristotle thought at the very dawn of conscious literary criticism. I would merely extend the scope of the descriptive venture so that it encompassed all literature, popular as well as elite, in order to provide a theory that shows the relationships that exist between all parts of the domain of literature. Structually, all literature has many, many things in common which get overlooked when critics are hell bent on making judgements on the badness of popular forms or when the critics are feverishly constructing "approaches" that attend to certain rarified features reflective of certain values, while neglecting the more pedestrian elements. Too often such criticism overlooks the artificiality and conventionality of all art, and the notion, clearly apprehended by pre-romantic criticism, that art works are fabricated to induce pleasure in the audience.

Unfortunately, time will not allow me to give examples of possibilities of this approach as I see them. Let me conclude by emphasizing that one can work toward a descriptive criticism if one proceeds on the assumption that all works are made, that they are contrived out of conventions and structures that have deep similarities throughout the range of art in spite of surface dissimilarities, and that literature can be seen as a single domain if one simply bothers to attend to these similarities. To the degree that we see such similarities between the parts of the domain of literature with which the students are affectively familiar and to which they know how to respond, they can be led to comprehend and discuss the less familiar areas with a greater hope of having the discussions achieve progress toward actual appreciation.